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THE SYSTEMIC BASIS OF AMERICAN POWER

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THE SYSTEMIC BASIS OF AMERICAN POWER

Introduction

A fundamental set of questions facing American strategists is: what are the United States' global interests, and what threats to and opportunities for advancing them exist? No one can approach these questions without assumptions—explicit or implicit—about the nature of American power today and expectations for the future. Power may exist in different forms and derive from a variety of sources, each implying different capabilities, limitations, and vulnerabilities. So, the details of American power matter, creating opportunities for American policy and presenting targets for competitors and opponents. As for interests—that elusive but central concept in virtually all policy debates—they, too, may be at least partially dependent on power. An interesting yet unproven hypothesis suggests that perceived interests increase with perceived increase in power.

Eight years into the post-Cold War Era, however, wide areas of disagreement and even confusion over the nature of American power continue to exist in policy and academic circles. Consensus exists on a number of key points: the United States is the unchallenged superpower with global powers far exceeding those of any other actor; American power rests on its economic and military strengths; and there is no immediate prospect of a peer challenger. At the same time, we cannot agree on what to call the current global system: is it unipolar, multipolar, or uni-multipolar? Is the United States a hegemon? Is the United States a benign hegemon or an imperial power? To what degree is American power dependent on voluntary cooperation from other actors? Why has the United States failed to prevail on many occasions? Is the current situation transient or enduring?

My approach to the nature of American power starts with the observation that American power is not simply the sum of quantitatively large military and economic assets. I hypothesize that additional factors, mostly systemic in nature, enter into the equation and that these factors are significant because they amplify American economic and military power or directly affect issues of limits, vulnerabilities and longevity. A full discussion of all these issues is beyond the scope of this short essay. I will focus on presenting my views on what these systemic factors may be and analyzing how they contribute to American power. For the purposes of this paper, I will treat states as unitary actors and not deal extensively with nonstate actors.

Discussion

There is broad agreement that America's preeminent position in the world today rests largely on its immense economy and unmatched military capabilities. But is this a full picture of American power? Are there any systemic factors that shape, facilitate, multiply, or constrain US power?

The working hypothesis of this paper is that there is a set of systemic factors—broadly defined—that are fundamental elements of current American power. These are: geographic insularity; regional power balances that offer the United States wide latitude for action; and the complex character of American relationships with other states.

Geographic Insularity

The possibility of a direct territorial threat or serious border dispute is simply not part of the American strategic frame of reference. The United States dominates the North American

landmass by dint of population, absolute wealth, and military capabilities. One can imagine complications following a Canadian breakup or spillover from instability in Mexico, but it is very hard to imagine a conventional military threat from either direction. Expanding our viewpoint to the entire Western Hemisphere, there is no current military threat nor any plausible future threat from within the hemisphere.

Geographic insularity confers several benefits on the America's global power position. First, American policy makers and strategists are not preoccupied by a close-in territorial threat. Second, American military forces can be designed for and focus on global power projection. Third, American forces can be utilized (e.g., forward presence, contingencies) with little concern for home or hemispheric defense considerations. In short, the United States enjoys a strategic flexibility unmatched by any other major power and unusual by any historic standard.

This is not to say that America is invulnerable or that there are no threats to the American homeland. The advent of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles ended America's near-absolute invulnerability some time ago. Conventional terrorism has been around for several decades. Recent years have seen the emergence of potential threats from terrorists or rogue states armed with nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. The progress of computer and communications technology has engendered the cyber threat to America's critical infrastructure. These are serious issues with which policy-makers must grapple. Even so, none of these factors seriously impairs strategic flexibility by causing a policy preoccupation with insecure borders or imposing a requirement for large standing forces.

Opportune Regional Distributions of Power

The details and stability of regional power balances vary markedly. However, one common characteristic is that in no case does a local power so dominate its region that the United States is effectively closed out or severely constrained in its ability to exert influence. On the contrary, in most cases the United States has wide latitude for action.

In Latin America, for example, a fragmented power balance together with local rivalries, instances of political instability, and economic issues provide the United States with entrée and levers of influence. In other regions, local rivalries have provided opportunities for the United States to develop relationships and shape regional affairs. This was the historic occasion for American involvement in Europe and continues to be the case in the Middle East and Asia.

Shaping regional affairs is not an abstract issue. What it means is the potential ability of the United States to stabilize regional rivalries, reduce the incidence of conflict, weave itself tightly into the regional power structure, and prevent the emergence of regional hegemons with dangerous aspirations. Achieving such goals would be far more difficult or impossible without favorable regional power balances and without the strategic flexibility afforded by geographic insularity.

Nor does shaping regional affairs necessarily imply taking sides in a hostile manner. In East Asia, for example, Japan values the American relationship as, among other things, a hedge against growing Chinese power. China is well aware of this. At the same time, China is aware that, to a degree, the U.S.-Japan relationship acts to reduce the possibility that Japan will reemerge as an assertive, militaristic power. Hence, though China resents what it perceives as

American efforts to “contain” it, China does not necessarily picture the United States as unequivocally hostile.

Obviously, the preceding discussion represents a narrow slice of China’s attitude towards the United States. A full appraisal would have to take account of a number of other important factors (Taiwan, trade, investment, proliferation, human rights, to name a few). Should we do so, we would probably find that, from the Chinese viewpoint, the relationship with the United States is a mixed bag of positive, negative and problematic elements. With this discussion of the character of the China-United States relationship, we have come to the third and final systemic factor of my hypothesis.

Character of American Relationships with Other States

In this section, I will argue that the complexity of America’s relationships with other states enhances American power by, in effect, diluting the impact of the negative elements in those relationships. This point is not self-evident and requires a fairly lengthy development.

For the purposes of this essay, an interstate relationship is the collection of mutual transactions, conditions and attitudes that affect the actions of two states.¹ I envisage a relationship as consisting of different components or dimensions. I identify three dimensions: political, economic, and cultural. Other categorizations are undoubtedly possible, but this should cover most bases for now. Each dimension can have positive (cooperative,

¹ While I focus on bilateral relationships between states, I see no reason in principle why the argument could not be extended to incorporate multilateral relationships and nonstate actors.

competitive) and negative (extremely competitive, threatening, conflictual) elements. In practice, there is probably no distinct line between positive and negative. Positive and negative elements may coexist.

- The political dimension includes all considerations of power. Positive elements consist of such actions as cooperation against a common foe. Negative elements could include local or global power rivalry or outright hostility as in mutual military threat perceptions. Traditional realists focus almost exclusively on this dimension.
- The economic dimension may include mutual trade, investment, and assistance (positive) as well as mild-to-bitter competition for markets and acrimonious disputes over restraints on trade (negative). Note that negative elements may be the flip side of a generally positive element, making *a priori* characterizations as positive or negative dubious. A broadly applicable element worthy of special notice here is that America is, by far, the world's largest consumer market; and access to that market is extremely important to a number of exporting states.
- The cultural dimension primarily refers to the spread of American concepts and values via information flow mechanisms such as news networks, entertainment media, educational institutions, and direct exposure.² (To be sure, it may be awareness of

² My characterization depicts a one-way flow of cultural influences. Foreign cultural influences on American society do occur, such as the appearance of religious cults or the intrusions of French deconstructivism. Although it is difficult to regard the impact of deconstructivism as anything other than negative, it is unlikely that it or other foreign cultural imports are significant in the context of this essay.

American cultural values that is spreading rather than acceptance of those values.) On the rhetorical level, at least, American political concepts have triumphed and dominate the global language of political discourse (e.g., democracy, accountability, open market, free trade, etc.). Strictly speaking, it is not easy to separate American influences from broader “Western” influences. Regardless of precise source, however, America is often perceived as the symbol of those influences. The most common negative element is mild to severe adverse reaction to perceived cultural threat, often labeled “cultural imperialism.” Another manifestation of the cultural dimension is the existence of shared culture (as in the relationship between British and American cultures) or ties between related ethnic or religious groups.

In theory, a relationship between two states can—but need not—be multidimensional with complex mixtures of positive, negative and borderline elements within any or all dimensions.

In practice, the U.S. has many and varied bilateral relationships. Let us briefly look at some examples.

- United Kingdom. Strongly positive political dimension with similar strategic perspectives and threat perceptions and a history of tight cooperation, but perhaps some differences in attitude towards European common defense initiatives. Strong, positive economic relationship with strong competitive elements in some sectors. Close cultural ties with no sense of cultural threat on either side. Overall, extremely strong, positive relationship.

- North Korea. Strongly negative political dimension with mutual threat perceptions bolstered by forces' size, dispositions and activities. No conventional economic ties, but North Korea dependent on exacting economic assistance by means of various provocations. Almost nonexistent cultural dimension other than strong mutual antipathy for each other's culture and political system. Overall, strongly negative relationship partially mitigated by North Korea's economic needs.
- France. Mixed positive political dimension characterized by broad but incomplete overlap of strategic perspectives, significant areas of disagreement and tension, French aggravation over American unilateralism and extraterritorialism, and American suspicions of the French agenda for Europe. Economically, significant trade relations, but strong competitors in several sectors (including military hardware) and severe trade disputes over reciprocal charges of protectionism. Culturally, similar perspectives on many political and social issues but French resentment of inroads of American culture and language. Overall, a functionally positive relationship punctuated by a number of points of enduring tension and a sense of rivalry, primarily from the French side.
- China. A highly mixed political dimension with elements of suspicion, awareness of lop-sided military capabilities, American anticipatory concerns for future potential of China, yet common cause to keep the region stable. Economically, very strong trade relationship, possibly more important to China than to U.S., with disputes over Chinese restraints on imports. Culturally, strong Chinese concerns for preventing infiltration of "dangerous" Western ideas.

- Egypt. Politically, a largely patron-client relationship with significant benefits for Egypt in form of critical military assistance and for U.S. in form of cooperative Egyptian attitudes on a range of Middle East issues; yet, Egypt anxious to avoid label of American satellite. Economically, Egypt partially dependent on American assistance and food sales but has not always followed American advice on domestic economic reform. Culturally, some anxieties and resentments over Western cultural intrusions.

Short as it is, this list serves to illustrate the variety and complexity of American relationships. Expanding the list to more states and in greater detail would almost surely continue the variety and probably amplify the complexity. We would see that the United States has a nontrivial relationship with almost every state around the globe. The majority is positive to neutral overall. A number are highly ambiguous. And only a very few are unequivocally negative and hostile. Many positive relationships include some strongly negative elements. Most negative relationships include a few positive elements. Single words such as ally, client, competitor, challenger and even enemy fail to capture the complexity of American relationships.

Complexity is not simply a descriptive term. I strongly suspect that the complexity of the typical relationship—the multidimensionality and the mixture of positive and negative elements—tends to mitigate or take the edge off the negative elements. This suspicion is supported by the conspicuous absence of what would be a key factor pushing in the opposite direction: fear of American militaristic expansionism. On the contrary, there is widespread

awareness that the United States does not present a territorial threat.³ In general, then, the positive or ambiguous elements of American relationships tend to predominate; and it is in only a few, exceptional cases (notably, the so-called rogue states) that negative military elements clearly predominate.

Taken not one-by-one but collectively, America's large number of relationships is itself a source of strength. Let us attempt to visualize the collectivity in the following manner: Assume it is possible to create a dynamic, physical representation of all American relationships, with the links between the United States and each other state able to indicate the different dimensions. The links would further be weighted in some manner to indicate the effects of positive and negative elements. I imagine the result as a vast, complex three-dimensional web with the United States in the center. The web represents the multiplicity of factors binding other actors, in greater or lesser degree, to the United States and thus providing opportunities for successfully influencing their behavior. Moreover, each link in the web would gain strength from the collectivity so that the whole would be stronger than the sum of individual links.

³ The importance of the missing expansionist factor was suggested by Josef Joffe in Josef Joffe, "How America Does It," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 5 (Sep/Oct 1997):13-27.

Conclusions

This essay has served more to work through the features of my hypothesis than to test it. To the degree the hypothesis as developed above is valid, the systemic factors cited act in three ways to amplify raw American economic and military power:

First, they confer tremendous strategic flexibility with wide latitude to act in all parts of the globe and opportunities to shape the power balance in every region.

Second, they create a dense web of bilateral relationships that—together with general awareness of lack of American expansionism—tends to encourage cooperation and temper impulses to focus on destructive rivalry. In more picturesque terms, the web lessens the oft-noted tendency of smaller powers to gang up and knock the big power down a few notches.

Third, the web of American relationships is a self-reinforcing construct that is stronger and more resilient than any of its parts. Additionally, the existence and operation of the web seems to depend more on voluntary cooperation than on compulsion. This may explain in part why the United States has such a curious record of success and failure at imposing its will since the end of the Cold War.

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